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## BELIEFS, RITES, AND CUSTOMS OF THE JEWS, CONNECTED WITH DEATH, BURIAL, AND MOURNING.

(AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE BIBLE AND LATER JEWISH  
LITERATURE.)

### III.

WHEN a professing Jew is about to "go the way of all the earth" (Josh. xxiii. 14), a solemn obligation is imposed upon those who visit him on his sick-bed (in itself a religious duty), to counsel him to make a full confession of his sins to God. His friends are not, however, to alarm him unnecessarily; but to introduce the suggestion in a casual manner, telling him that many persons who recited such a confession under similar circumstances did not die in consequence, whilst others have passed away without embracing the precious opportunity afforded them for repentance. Possibly through the merit of unreserved confession, complete recovery will be vouchsafed to the sufferer (T.B. *Shabb.* 32a; *Semach Sutarte*, Ed. Horowitz, I.); for we are told שכל מי שיחטא ואומר חטאתי אין רשות לו שכל מי שיחטא ואומר חטאתי אין רשות לו למלאך ליגע בו (*Mid. Tanch.* Ed. Buber, Numbers 70a).

Should a man in *articulo mortis* be able to utter an audible confession, it is incumbent upon him to do so; but, if he be incapable of fulfilling such a task, a mental confession will suffice. A confession, breathed in silence within the heart, is regarded in the sight of God as of equal value with one spoken aloud, provided it be true and earnest, and proceed from a being in the full possession of his mental faculties (*Semach Sut.* I.). If a man be unfit to frame a confession himself, one may recite on his behalf and in

his hearing: "May my death prove an atonement for my iniquities" (שבלי הלקט I. 169a). In ancient times, the same formula had to be pronounced before his death by the criminal condemned to be executed (T.B. *Sanhed.* 43b).

An exhortation to confession is not offered in the presence of ignorant people, women or children (*Semach Sut.* I.). It is almost superfluous to add that the Jewish priest has never been invested with the power of bestowing absolution on the confessor.

The duty of confession is clearly laid down in Leviticus v. 5, and Numbers v. 5-7. In the following passages, it is identical with giving glory unto God: Joshua vii. 19; Ezra x. 11; Jn. ix. 24; 1 Esdr. ix. 8.

As a proof of the efficacy of confession, we are informed (T. B. *Sanhed.* 43b) that Achan was vouchsafed a share in the future life, simply on account of his having readily acknowledged his sin (Joshua vii. 19; for further illustrations compare Numbers xxi. 7f.; Psalm xxxii. 5). We also find in the Book of Proverbs (xxviii. 13): "He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall obtain mercy." Likewise the *Yalkut* on Isaiah, § 342; מי שמורה הקב"ה מרחם עליו (cf. 1st Epistle of John i. 9).

It seems that the Falashas (a race of Abyssinian Jews, but according to Dr. Neubauer, *JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW* III. 542, "scarcely of the Jewish race at all") also conform to this practice. The Falasha, before his death, calls the dervish, who usually acts as his spiritual adviser, and makes a full confession of his sins. Should he expire without having discharged this duty, the prayer called פתח is not offered on his behalf (*Eldad ha-dani*, Abr. Epstein, Pressburg, p. 171).

Likewise, among the Abyssinians proper, a priest is called in to listen to the confession of the dying, and to offer him consolation (*Social History of the Races of Mankind*, Featherman, Div. V., p. 619). It is, too, well known

that the 110th Sura of the Koran is supposed to represent an admonition to Mohammed to prepare for death by asking pardon of God.

And here I may remark that the ordeal of dying appears to have constituted in itself an expiatory sacrifice. Thus we find in *Mish. Yoma* (VIII. 8): "The Yom Kippur and death make atonement when accompanied with sincere repentance." See also T. J. *Shebuoth* I. 6, where it is deduced from Isai. xxii. 14, "This iniquity shall not be expiated by you till you *die*," *שהמיתה ממרקת*, that death cleanses from sin.

This view is supported by the "writing of Hezekiah." The king says (Isai. xxxviii. 17), "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of nothingness; for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" (so that my death is no longer required as an atonement for them).

The modern Jew, in the *קרי* which he recites in his last hours, also prays, like his forefathers: "Oh, may my death be an atonement for all the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of which I have been guilty against thee" (*Authorised Daily Prayer-Book*, Ed. Rev. S. Singer, p. 317).

It has been customary from very early times to give a solemn charge to one's household before one's death. This is known as *הצויות*. Thus we read in the Bible that the Patriarch Isaac delivered a last exhortation to his sons (Gen. xxviii. 1f.). Jacob also addressed his children on several occasions before the days of his pilgrimage were spent, and foretold their destiny (Gen. xlvii. 29f., xlviii. 15, xlix. 1ff.). Joseph seems to have done likewise (Gen. l. 25). Moses made a powerful appeal to the children of Israel on the eve of his departure from their midst (Deut. xxxi. 23—xxxii. 47), and his disciple Joshua took leave of his people in a similar manner (Josh. xxiii. 2ff.). David, too, is said to have laid an emphatic last injunction upon his son and successor (1 Kings ii. 1; 1 Chr. xxviii. 9). That such a custom was generally

prevalent may be inferred from Isai. xxxviii. 1, where we find the Prophet instructing Hezekiah "to charge his house" before he dies. See also 2 Sam. xvii. 23.

*Die Schatzhöhle* records the final admonition of Adam to his surviving offspring (I. 9), while in the *Book of Jubilees* (xx., xxi., xxii.) Abraham is described as addressing his children on the eve of his death. The Testament of Adam, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, and similar Apocryphal writings show that the צווייה was regarded as a wide-spread usage. With respect to the practice of charging one's house in comparatively modern times, an excellent article on "Jewish Ethical Wills of Later Times," by Mr. I. Abrahams, might be consulted with advantage in THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, III., 436-484. The "charge" invariably concludes with a blessing. For ancient examples of the latter, see Gen. xxvii. 4, 27ff., 39f. xxviii. 1ff., xlix. 1ff. T. B. *Berach*, 28b; *Meg.* 28a.

It is further usual to dispose of one's personal property before death. To this effect an injunction is laid down in Ecclesiasticus (xxxiii. 23): "At the time when thou shalt end thy days and finish thy life, distribute thine inheritance." As an example we are told (1 Macc. i. 56) that "Alexander called his servants . . . and parted his kingdom among them while he was yet alive." (But this statement is based on an untrustworthy authority, *Speaker's Commentary, in loco*). It is likewise related of Judith, that before she died she did distribute her goods to all them that were nearest of kindred to Manasses her husband, and to them that were the nearest of her kindred" (Judith xvi. 24). In *Semach Sut.* I. the duty of arranging one's affairs and discharging one's financial liabilities before death is particularly emphasised.

It would appear that ultra-pious Jews on the verge of death also wash their hands, presumably to depart in a state of ritual purity (cf. מעבר יבק, 78a, and the declaration of the Psalmist, Ps. xxvi. 6: "I will wash mine hands in innocency; so will I compass thine altar, O Lord").

Likewise "when a learned or pious Muslim feels that he is about to die, he sometimes performs the ordinary ablution as before prayer, that he may depart from life in a state of bodily purity" (*Modern Egyptians*, Stanley Lane-Poole, 1875, Vol. II., ch. xxviii.).

It is usual to kindle lights before the גוסס (as the Jew is called when the rattles in the throat show that he is at the point of death), and two reasons for the custom are furnished by מעבר יבק (105ab): (1) To make the demons flee, as they are possessed of full power at night, and light extinguishes the wicked (אור רשעים ידעך, Job xviii. 5); (2) The light is symbolical of the human soul, which is flickering (cf. Prov. xx. 27: "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord"). The latter explanation, whilst invested with the charm of poetry, cannot be the correct one. For it is a fact that the same custom is observed in a kindred form in countries situated widely apart, and in almost every instance a different reason is adduced for the practice. See a note on the subject embodying copious examples, by James G. Frazer, in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, XV., 90f; and cf. *Folklore of North-East Scotland*, W. Gregor, 207, and *Coorg Folklore*, by G. L. Gomme, in *Folklore Journal*, VII., p. 300.

Indeed, it is most probable that the first explanation of יבק מעבר contains the essence of truth, for in Ps. xci., generally known as שיר נשל פנעים, "the Psalm for protection against evil spirits" (cf. T. B. *Shebu*, 5b), the Psalmist expresses the conviction that God will deliver him from the pestilence that walketh in DARKNESS, and that a thousand (demons) shall fall at his side, without one coming nigh him (cf. *Targ. on Ps. xci. 5*, מוֹזִיקֵי דְאֻזְלִין, בליליא, and *Mid. Tillim*, Ed. Buber, 199b, and note the LXX. rendering of Ps. xci. 6, יְשׁוּד צְהָרִים, καὶ δαιμονίου μεσημβρινού).

Poetical minds might interpret the burning of the light as expressive of the thought enshrined in the song of the ransomed soul (Job xxxiii. 28): "He hath redeemed my

soul from going into the pit, and my life shall behold the light."

Mr. Frazer states that the Jews used to place beside this light a glass of water and a towel, the reason assigned being that the Angel of Death might wash his sword in the water and wipe it with the towel. But the practice is condemned as superstitious by Rabbi Abraham Danzig, in his work *Chochmath Adam* (Ed. Stettin, p. 461).

Not the least pathetic feature of the Jewish death-bed is the fact that the last words that escape the lips of the dying man represent a solemn declaration of the Unity of God, the Children of Israel's confession of faith, שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד (Deut. vi. 4)—the first Hebrew sentence the Jew lisps in the dawn of life, and that which he whispers on the threshold of eternity. This is, if possible, recited in the presence of ten adult males (the number requisite to form a congregation of Israel), who continue offering prayers for the dying till life is wholly extinct (*Book of Life*, Ed. Ascher, p. 190, and *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, p. 317).

Until the last breath has actually left the body, the dying man is to be regarded in every respect as a living person, entitled to the full rights and privileges of such, and nothing must be done to accelerate his departure. He who acts contrary to the spirit of this command is held "guilty of death" (T.B. *Semach* I.). A man must, under no circumstances, be left to die alone (*Kolbo*, § 114).

There are various traditions with regard to the sensations experienced by man in his last moments. He is supposed to be visited by some of the ministering angels, one of whom reckons up the number of his days and years, and warns him of his approaching end. Another asks him whether he has been occupied with Torah and deeds of charity. The Recording Angel then enumerates all the acts of his life, and he is told: Thus and thus hast thou done, in such and such a place, on such and such a day; and he confesses all. He is then requested to affix his seal

to the record (cf. Job xxxvii. 7), and, according to Ps. li. 6, he even acknowledges the justice of his doom (בן עדרן מסכת חבוט הקבר, *Beth Ha-Mid.*, Jellinek V., 48f. וגיוחם *Beth Ha-Mid.*, Jellinek I.; cf. *Mid. Tanch.* Ed. Buber, *Gen.* 11a).

There are also some interesting Mohammedan legends with regard to the dying man. Death asks him, "How hast thou found the world?" The man replies: "I have found it vain and deceptive." Then the World, personified, exclaims: "O Sinner! art thou not ashamed? Thou didst sin while resident in me, and didst not keep aloof from evil; thou didst long for me while I had no desire for thee; thou didst make no distinction between permitted and prohibited; thou didst walk in careless ease, reflecting with complacency that thou wouldst one day leave the world, and now I am rid of thee and of thy doings." Then the man perceives the fortune he has amassed already passed into the hands of another, and it, too, personified, addresses him: "O Sinner! thou didst obtain possession of me by unlawful means, and didst not devote any portion of me to the poor and needy: therefore I have this day fallen into strange hands." On hearing all this, the man makes a pathetic appeal to God: "O Lord, suffer me to return to life, that I may 'follow up the worthiest'" (Koran, Sur. xxiii. 101, 102; cf. *Pirge R. Eliezer*, ch. xxxiv.). When death has reached the throat the eyes take leave of one another, saying, "Farewell to thee till the resurrection!" The ears, hands, and feet do the same; and, lastly, the soul bids an affecting adieu to the body (*Muhamm. Eschat.*, chaps. iii. and iv.).

In this solemn moment, man, according to Jewish tradition, is vouchsafed a momentary glimpse of God Himself, as it says (Exod. xxxiii. 20), "No man can see me and live;" i.e., man cannot see me in life, but in death, as the Psalmist declares (Ps. xxii. 30): "All they that go down to the dust shall bow before him, even he that cannot keep his soul alive" (מסכת חבוט הקבר, *Beth Ha-Mid.*, Jellinek, I.



*Pirge R. Eliezer*, ch. xxxiv.; *Semach Sut.*, ch. iv.; *Mid. Tillim*, Ed. Buber, p. 99a).

As I have previously mentioned, the immediate cause of man's death is a visitation from the "Arch-Fear in a visible form." As he himself informed Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (*Beth Ha-Mid.* Jellinek, II. 94), the Angel of Death "stands sentry by the head," waiting for the opportune moment when he may pour the poisonous drop which clings to his sword down the throat of his victim. (See a poem by Robert Browning, entitled "Doctor —.") It is also stated (*ibid.*) that it is not one but three drops that fall from his sword—one produces death; the second putrefaction; and the third causes the face to assume a yellowish-green colour.

For the way in which the soul issues from the body at death, according to the view of different peoples, see a brilliant essay by James G. Frazer, in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol. XV., entitled, "Certain Burial Customs, as Illustrative of the Primitive Theory of the Soul" (Note iii. on p. 82 ff.). I may cite just one example.

The Mohammedan mythology has a tradition that "When God wishes to summon the soul of man, the Death-Angel comes to his mouth in order to take the soul thence. The praise of God issues from his mouth, and says, 'Thou hast no path by way of me, for from hence was God praised.' . . . The Angel returns to God and reports it God says, 'Take the soul from another part.' He comes to the hand. Here he is met by the good deeds, and so at the feet; these say, 'We have visited the sick.' The ear says, 'I have hearkened to the Koran.' The eye says, 'I have read the Scriptures.' God bids the Angel write his name on his hand and show it to the man, and the soul leaps forth at sight of the name, and parts without bitterness." (*Muhamm. Eschat.*, Wolff, p. 30, quoted by James in his edition of the "Testament of Abraham," p. 66).

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(To be continued.)